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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: FIRST INTERNATIONAL BIOTECH CONFERENCE HELD
IN ASTANA DECEMBER 12-13

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11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: The First International Conference "Astana Biotech 2008" took place on December 12-13, at the National Center for Biotechnology in Astana, Kazakhstan. Its stated goal was to develop further Kazakhstan's overall scientific potential. Speakers represented a range of laboratories and research institutes, including several from the United States. Among the presenters was a representative from Russia's Vector, a state-supported research center that the Centers for Disease Control called "one of Russia's largest and most sophisticated former bioweapons facilities." According to Global Security.org, Vector has been involved in the development of virus weapons such as smallpox, bubonic plague, and anthrax since the late 1980s. The adjacent exhibition hall had numerous displays from local and international companies. Research laboratories also displayed billboards highlighting their work on genetic modification in cotton, wheat, corn, and rice. The genetically modified organism (GMO) situation in Kazakhstan is still quite fluid. Currently there is no ban on GMO food products in Kazakhstan, although all GMO goods must be labeled, and all imported goods must first be analyzed to certify their safety. END SUMMARY.

FIRST INTERNATIONAL BIOTECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE IN ASTANA

13. (SBU) REO attended the First International Conference "Astana Biotech 2008" in Astana, December 12-13, at the National Center for Biotechnology. A biotech exhibition filled with numerous stalls was adjacent to the conference hall, and attendees could easily view the many diverse products and equipment available, as well as see the latest research developments from a wide variety of scientific organizations.

14. (SBU) National Center for Biotechnology General Director Erlan Ramankulov said that the overall goal of the conference was to develop further Kazakhstan's overall scientific potential. It was also important to learn more about the diversity of biotechnological research that colleagues are conducting, he said. Indeed, this

observer was quite impressed with the depth of knowledge and experience that the conference brought together, with participants representing laboratories and research institutes from Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, as well as Kazakhstani scientists working overseas at the University of California Davis, Rutgers University, Auburn University, Texas A&M, Institute Gustave Roussy (France), Nagasaki University (Japan), and Hebrew University.

BIOTECH LABORATORY RESEARCH ON VIRUSES

15. (SBU) There were many speeches outlining the research and development (R&D) progress at the various laboratories and institutes in biotechnology, and REO selected two as representative.

Belarus Ministry of Health Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology Director of R&D Dr. Leonid Titov outlined some of his institute's work, such as research on the formation of resistance to antibiotics used to fight human viruses, the development of innovative methods and technologies for the manufacture of vaccine test systems and reagents (e.g., a chemical substance used to produce a chemical reaction to detect, measure, and produce other substances), the localization of tuberculosis strains, and research on various diphtheria ribotypes that are prevalent in Belarus and Russia.

16. (SBU) Russian (Novosibirsk) State Research Center of Virology and Biotechnology "Vector" Deputy General Director Elena Nechaeva said her laboratory was researching countermeasures to global biological threats, virus research (including Ebola), and biological security. She said Vector had many years of experience working with dangerous viruses. She said Vector is one of Russia's largest R&D laboratories and actively collaborates with research centers around the world, such as the Centers for Disease Control, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Energy national laboratories, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (NOTE: According to Global Security.org, since the late 1980s, Vector has

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contributed to the development of virus weapons such as smallpox, bubonic plague, and anthrax. It has a high level of bio-containment capacity that enables it to work safely with viral pathogens and contains a special Laboratory Animal Farm that raises laboratory animals for experiments. They have had several contracts with The International Science and Technology Center, an intergovernmental organization that facilitates international science projects and assists the global scientific and business community to source and engage with Russian and CIS institutes that develop or possess scientific know-how, which helps keep Russian Cold War-era scientists gainfully employed. END NOTE.)

BIOTECH EXHIBITS ARE VARIED, MODERN, AND COMMERCIAL

17. (SBU) Several companies and institutes had displays in the adjacent exhibition hall, and the exhibits showed the depth and variety of biotech products available in Kazakhstan today. Some were local Kazakhstani companies, such as Medilend, displaying testing equipment for clinical immunology, biochemistry, and microbiology; Vel'd, selling laboratory and medical equipment to various labs in Central Asia; and Yumgiskor Holding, a laboratory equipment distributor for Radiometer Copenhagen, Sysmex (Japan), and Nihon Kohden (Japan). Others were international, such as Olympus (Russia), producing diagnostic laboratory equipment; Sartorius (Germany), with control systems for sterilization of pharmaceutical preparations and centrifuges for their preparation; Techniplast (Italy), specializing in laboratory cages for mice and other lab animals; and Bio-Rad (U.S.), displaying computer systems for bio-molecular analysis and testing, and an automated electrophoresis system (e.g., movement of charged particles in a colloid or suspension when an electric field is applied).

GMO RESEARCH IS ACTIVE IN KAZAKHSTAN

18. (SBU) Various research institutes also had billboard displays explaining their latest research developments and achievements. REO noticed that several were doing considerable work in genetic modification of cotton, wheat, rice, and corn, the core agricultural products here in Central Asia, either to make them more resistant to

pests and diseases and more adaptable to arid climates, or to increase their yield per hectare. (COMMENT: In September, Dr. L. Giddings, President of PrometheusAB, Inc, a biotechnology company, visited Astana to meet with counterparts in agricultural biotechnology. He characterized the Kazakhstani scientists as open and adaptable, "not hostile or prejudiced." Giddings said the Ministry of Environment "seemed eager to cooperate" and the National Biotechnology Center was interested in pursuing collaborative projects. According to Giddings, "the most formidable potential allies are in the Academy of Nutrition, who have a strong focus on science as the basis for decision-making and firmly believe that the use of biotechnology in agriculture is a solution, not a problem." END COMMENT). The Institute of Biology and Biotechnology, a subsidiary of the National Center for Biotechnology (hosting this conference), does research in cell engineering and genetic engineering -- e.g., they conduct research in genetic modified organisms (GMO).

¶9. (SBU) The GMO situation in Kazakhstan is still quite fluid. There is a Law on Food Safety (2007) and related Rules on Distribution of GMO in Kazakshtan that stipulate that genetically modified food must first be analyzed in laboratories to certify its safety before it is imported to Kazakhstan. Currently, the Kazakh Academy of Nutrition in Almaty has the only laboratory in Kazakhstan that can do GMO tests.

¶10. (SBU) According to Lyutsia Kalamkarova, head of this Quality Control and Food Safety Laboratory, currently there is no ban on GMO food products in Kazakhstan. All GMO products and food containing GMO ingredients must be labeled accordingly. The Ministry of Health is developing technical regulations and rules that will tighten control over food for children. Kalamkarova said the weak point in quality and safety control for children's food is that agencies that

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have no capacity for detailed analysis of children's food are nevertheless issuing food safety certificates.

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